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ABSTRACT

In this paper, a former educator, now a family counselor traces the recent history of parent involvement programs and relates his experiences in developing a rationale and model for parents' involvement in their children's education. Since the 1950s, the mutual understanding between schools and families about their shared responsibility for education has eroded. High concentrations of poorer families in some urban and rural schools contain many parents with negative attitudes toward school or without the time or skills to help their children. In addition, the numbers, in all socioeconomic classes, of single parents and families with two fully employed parents have continued to grow. The "Great Society" programs of the 1960s and 1970s had little success in involving those parents whose children needed it most. In the 1980s, influenced by research confirming the importance of the home in school success, parent involvement efforts shifted their emphasis to specific parent behaviors in the home and the ways in which school could foster such behaviors. This paper recommends a task force approach in which teachers, parents, and community leaders act as facilitators to train and encourage parents to work with their children at home. This model can be successful if the school: (1) takes a proactive, positive attitude; (2) seeks parent input in planning and managing the program; (3) takes the program to the family in the home, neighborhood, or workplace; (4) focuses on home-based activities; and (5) respects family cultures and values. (SV)

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POSITIVE PARENT INVOLVEMENT IS POSSIBLE IF...

My fourth year of teaching was in a rural Texas school district of 150 students in grades 1 through 12. It was named Olden, and its name and reputation were compatible. My tenure there was in the early 1960's. Olden's heyday had been forty years earlier during the Ranger oil field boom. In fact, the movie "Boom Town" was based on the oil strike in and around Olden

When I arrived, there were no derricks, just concrete slabs and foundations of buildings long since dilapidated or removed. The post office, a barber shop, and a Coke machine were the only commercial establishments left.

Olden had three church buildings and three school buildings. One school building housed the administration and grades 7-12. A second building housed the sixty elementary students and five teachers. The gym was the third structure where the community came together to cheer on the boys and girls basketball teams, Olden's only athletic program.

Like any other school, Olden had its traditions. The one that struck me the most was how the students felt about girls graduating from high school. The community code was that any girl worth her diploma was married by the time she received it. The May that preceded my arrival witnessed the marrriage and then the graduation of the superintendent's daughter. This double event was a normal, expected experience for the community, and ***it left me with some deep insights into the power of community mores, peer pressure, and involved parents.***

Since leaving Olden, I have often reflected on the power of unspoken expectations from the groups that impact our lives. Also, since then, I have felt a need and desire to work with parents in helping them to help their children do well in school. In addition to the Olden experience, there were two factors that led me to this field of work.

Family Influence

I grew up in a family of 5 brothers, 4 sisters, two parents, and several uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, and nieces. My youngest sister and I, being the youngest in the family, served as baby sitters for our older brothers and sisters.

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As a teenager, my parents never said I should go to college. None of my teachers recommended that I go. The unspoken expectation of me was to enter the military as my 5 brothers had, serve my time, return to the farm or a local job, get married, and have children and rear them to repeat the process.

There was one hitch: My brothers, wise in the ways of the world (unlike my parents), told me, "You will go to college." So, I became the first Motsinger to leave the farm straight out of high school and go directly to college. Later, Motsingers, both older and younger than I, entered the collegiate world.

As An Educator

A second factor that led me to the concept of family involvement was my work as an educator. As I worked with students, first as a teacher and later as a coach and administrator, I reached the point at which *I felt I could predict which students would do well and which ones would do poorly and likely drop out.* This insight came as I dealt with the parents. I found that parents who were involved in a positive and assertive manner produced children who did better in school. ***Parents who set education as a priority and showed personal attention to the victories and defeats of their children later came back to see their children graduate, often with honors.***

Family Counselor

After 24 years of school-related experience, I left the classroom world to pursue my dream of helping parents on a full-time basis. I began a family-counseling practice so that I could write, counsel, and teach. As I pursued this three-fold career track, I was invited to give PTA presentations. One of the first things I noticed about myself was that I didn't feel satisfied to speak just to those few "good parents" who showed up. For 24 years, I had gone to PTA meetings as an educator and parent only to see and talk with the parents who did not need to come. At nearly every meeting, I wished I could have met those parents *who needed to come but did not.*

Now that I was older, my reaction was that I don't have time to play games. I needed to get to the heart of this problem. My response was to take up the challenge of getting my message to the parents without expecting the parents to come to the school PTA meeting to hear it. My goal was to take the objectives of the PTA, that was now 103 years old (founded Feb. 17, 1897), and work through it to take the message to the parents wherever they could most easily hear it (at their houses, churches, or workplaces), understand it, and commit to applying it.

My Readings

First, I began to read whatever I could on parental involvement. I found a research article by Carol Ascher on the issue of parental involvement. She wrote that parent involvement means different things to different people. She found it could mean advocacy of issues, volunteering as a classroom aide, serving as a leader in a parent-school organization, and/or simply working with their own children at home.

Ascher stated that the continuity between the home and school had always been an assumed reality for the American middle class family. The school depended on the middle class families to socialize their children for school life. In turn, the family depended on the school to educate the youth to carry on the same values as the family supported and equip them with the skills and abilities to be capable of carrying out their societal roles. The problem of the present and foreseeable future is that this mutual understanding no longer exists in the rural and urban schools to the degree that we knew up through the 1950's.

By the opening of this decade, the middle class parent and middle-age wage earners had moved to the suburbs from the rural and urban areas. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 400,000 left rural America in 1989; therefore, both the rural and the urban school too often have been left with those "too poor to move," along with the very young and the elderly (TSCA, Winter, 1989, Vol. 2, #2, p.1). In fact, the town of Olden no longer even has a school.

In the rural areas where the school leaders *did not link the students with the ouside world*, the middle class family moved in order to make this link for their children. With 55% of the nation's 15,000 school districts enrolling fewer than 1,000 students, America still has 9 million, or a quarter of its population, in small schools; therefore, W. David Mulkey, a University of Florida professor, believes the small schools must link up with the world around them in terms of job skills and adult education... This will keep the small school relevant. (Ed. Week, 11-8-89, p.4)

Middle class parents moving to the suburbs means the rural and urban schools have an abundance of families with single parents, who often work overtime, and/or two working parents who are hard put to provide basic needs. Then, there are those few landowner parents who may have their children either in the school or in a private school.

What has been left is a school environment of middle class teachers, a few middle and upper class parents, and a majority of lower socio-economic parents and students.

The poorer parents are often not of the mind set to be involved with either the school or their children's school-related activities. The school is a reminder of too many negative life experiences, and many of these parents are not capable of helping their children with school work. Also, the poorer parents know that the tax support for the school is from the property owners who sit on the school board and, in essence, make all the decisions. To these parents, the school is for the children of the board members and other "wealthy" parents, but not their children.

Out of this dilemma grew resentment from many poor families toward educators whom they accused of being uncaring and unsympathetic to their children. Many teachers began to expect less and less of the children from the poorer families and, in most cases, got it. This only confirmed the suspicions of the teachers. Recent research by the developers of Teacher Expectation and Student Achievement (TESA) Workshops found that teachers do tend to give the high achieving students more attention than those who tend to lag behind. As a result, the underachieving students go home saying, "Miss Smith doesn't like me." The parents then feel, "It is because we are poor," and resentment grows.

Recent History of Parental Involvement

President Lyndon B. Johnson's mid-60's plans for the "Great Society" had a two-fold notion. The first was that poor families were to be empowered with the resources to help themselves. The second was that the school was to be the vehicle to bring this about; therefore, programs such as "Headstart," "Follow Through," and Job Corps came into existence. $1.5 billion was allocated to education alone. *By 1980, we had learned that increased federal spending* ***did not*** *banish the problems of the poor; neither did it empower them to raise their children's achievement levels.* In fact, the "Great Society" itself was blamed for making the problem worse rather than eliminating it. George Silder, in Wealth and Poverty, noted that the leaders of the war on poverty committed the mistake of hiding certain realities from the poor, mainly that *to live well and get out of poverty they must do 2 things: Keep their families intact, and work harder than those less poor and those in the middle and upper class.*

During the 60's, however, parental involvement increased and, in terms of advocacy and oversight of programs, reached its peak in the early 1970's. All Title I programs required parent advisory councils. School district leaders were stressed by having to put so much decision-making power in the hands of the parents. This was a great change for professional educators as

well as for the parents who often had more zeal than skill while the pro's had the skill to run a school but not the will to bring in "outsiders." The change was painful.

For whatever reasons, the decade of the 70's saw very little increase in parental involvement in the schools as volunteers and in the homes helping their children. The parents for which the "Great Society" programs were designed often remained passive regarding interacting with the teachers about their children's behavior and assignments. As a result, the educators began to lose confidence and patience in the parental involvement movement.

As the decade closed and the 80's began, educators felt the sting of the harsh criticism for the low test scores and high dropout rate. Their response was to focus on what they could get a handle on: "The improvement of teaching" and "excellence in education."

Simultaneously, more middle class parents moved to the suburbs leaving an even wider gap between the middle class "work ethic" educators and the "welfare ethic" parents found in so many of the dependent families.

Also, the educators had moved from salaries lower than most of the parents of their students to salaries higher than most of the parents in the rural and inner cities. Educators were living by the values concerning success in school while the parents of their students were living by values concerning basic needs. Many parents were mainly concerned about just keeping the kids together even if mom and dad couldn't keep their marriage together.

Alhough the requirements of parental involvement in federal programs remained intact, the educators were determined to educate all students, either with or without the parents' assistance.

As the 80's unfolded, the effective schools movement drew the attention of many educators. As the data from the effective schools research was applied, some schools found ways to succeed with their at-risk students, even without great parental involvement. The effective school researchers came forth with six characteristics of effective schools. Not one of them mentioned parental involvement; however, by the end of the 80's, buttressed with even more hard research data that parental involvement produced positive results, parental involvement was added as the 7th characteristic of effective schools.

Ascher gives 3 reasons as to why the parental involvement movement stayed alive through the 70's and 80's. *First, there was a growing concern about the health of the family and the*

importance of family life. This was brought to light by the growing number of single parents in all socio-economic classes and its related problems.

Second, schools were receiving such poor grades on their success with the students that public confidence in their ability to produce students capable of holding jobs and being competitive with workers from other countries was undermined. In the 1988 Gallup Poll of the public's attitude toward the public schools (Phi Delta Kappan, Sept. '88), it was noted that the public had changed its rating of the school very little over the last four years. In fact, people who live in communities of more than one million residents believe the schools are worse now than 5 years ago. The smaller communities rated their schools at a higher level of satisfaction.

The third reason for sustaining parental involvement had to do with so many children coming into school at kindergarten and grade one levels ill-equipped to keep up with others. The school had a desire to help the pre-K student become better prepared. Working with the parents seemed to be the natural place to start.

Tied with this was the new research that showed that the home environment was one of the best predictors of success in school. As more research studies confirmed the benefit of parent involvement, the movement caught a new life.

NEW LIFE-NEW EMPHASIS

The differences in the parent involvement efforts of the 70's and the 80's were to be found in *less emphasis on advocacy issues and attendance of school activities and more emphasis on specific parental behavior in the home and what the school could do to help parents achieve these home-based behaviors.*

When one figures that the number of hours spent at school in K-12 adds up to only 13% of the child's teachable time, it is plain that more effort needs to be put into enrichment activities at home.

These specific behaviors have been pointed out in a review of research done by Rhoda M. Becher of the National Institute of Education. These behaviors are as follows:

1. Set high expectations.
2. Give frequent interactions.
3. View themselves as teachers.
4. Use complex language (complete sentences).
5. Provide problem-solving strategies.
6. Act as models of learning and achievement.
7. Reinforce what is learned in school.

Research on High and Low Achievers

In addition to the research from other sources, I wanted to

do a research project of my own. *I wanted to see if the differences between high achievers and low achievers had a parental involvement factor.*

I sent out close to 1,000 questionnaires to high-achieving juniors and seniors in high schools. I ended up with 417 useable responses from the following areas:

Academic.....118
Athletics..... 99
Band.....101
Leadership..... 99

Then, I surveyed 103 high-school-age prison inmates. Last, I surveyed 108 dropout students who had enrolled in a GED program.

The results proved beyond any doubt that parental involvement is a major key in success in school. All these students came through the similar elementary and middle schools and had similar teachers. I became convinced that the home environment is a key.

The conclusions I drew from my own research were as follows:

1. **The public school is designed and managed for the highly-motivated student who "gets along" well with adults, especially teachers.**
2. **The personal profile of the dropout student is very similar to that of the inmate.**
3. **The educational level of parents will be a predictor of the educational level of the youth.**
4. **Personal attention is a better motivator than money and special privileges.**
5. **Church attendance has a positive influence on youth.**
6. **Mothers are the most influential people on young people, be the youth high achievers, dropouts or inmates.**
7. **A positive cohesive relationship is the number- one factor in influencing student behavior.**
8. **Having 2 parents will give a student a 200% better chance at success in school.**

To me, the most important factor is not advocacy or volunteering, but it is what a parent does in his/her own home with and for his/her children. The most profitable time for the child and society at large is to train up a winner in your own home. Then, go out to help others.

One model I am promoting now is for a local school to set up a **parental involvement task force.** It is made up of at least 13 persons. The task force members are as follows:

1. **The principal,** who can provide overall approval and credibility to the program.

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2. **One counselor**, who can train parent facilitators who conduct parent support/education groups.
3. **Three classroom teachers**, who can lend encouragement to other teachers to work more closely with parents. These three teachers could also be facilitators.
4. **Six parents**, who can be facilitators of the parent groups but also provide input to the school for other parents.
5. **Two community leaders from the business/religious sectors**, who can actually train parents while the parents are at work and/or at church.

This task force has as its function the training and encouragement of parental involvement.

Each facilitator takes a group of 8 to 12 parents for the duration of a school year. They meet to hear a live or video presentation. They get acquainted in a relaxed social setting, familiar and comfortable to their lifestyle and on their home turf. They listen to the presentation with 2 purposes in mind: To find one or two ideas they can use immediately and at no financial cost, and to see if they have a question they want discussed.

Next, they meet in groups of 3 for 10 minutes to compile a list of ideas and a list of questions. The facilitator knows that drawing ideas from the group will cause a greater commitment than just telling them what to do. The facilitator is trained to also draw responses from the group to match the questions. Revelance and bonding in a positive and productive environment send the parents back to their children motivated to carry out the ideas.

Follow-up meetings are carried out to share success stories and discuss questions.

In conclusion, I believe that all parents are interested in the success of their children. The school is still the vehicle to help parents realize their dreams for their children. The only catch is parents must do their part with the school's leadership. With this cooperation, those dreams for the children can become a reality.

POSITIVE PARENT INVOLVEMENT IS POSSIBLE IF...

1. ***The school takes a proactive lead in offering the program.***

   The school has the organizational structure already set up to carry an effective parent involvement program. The school has the facilities, equipment, and

supplies to carry a program. School personnel know more about learning and behavior than most parents.

Finally, the school needs to get more parent involvement as a hedge against a loss of money from the state allotment that is based on average daily attendance. The school also needs parent involvement to improve achievement scores. When schools are ranked in their state by test scores, it becomes very embarrassing to be in the lower rankings.

In essence, the school has the control of the learning process and a lot to lose by not getting parents involved.

2. ***The school seeks parental input to plan and manage the program.***

Listen, first; respond, second. Getting a few parents to do a needs survey including how to meet those needs will increase the involvement of the parents. The democratic process of listening to the people will result in a more relevant and more enticing program. This allows the parents to own a part of the solution and not just the problem. This allows the school leaders to be perceived as relational and responsive rather than reclusive and removed.

3. ***The school adopts a positive attitude about the value of parental involvement.***

Parents, like students, trust the teacher and school leaders to know what is best. If the school believes in a certain project, so will the parents. When teachers, counselors, and principals show a positive attitude about a project, the parents will generally become supportive and cooperative and carry out their role.

4. ***The school expects the program to be a successful win/win endeavor.***

Parents want to know that their efforts will do more than make life easier for the principal and classroom teacher. Whatever the parent is asked to do must include benefits for the parent, but even more benefits for the child.

5. ***The school takes the program to the family (parent & parent figures) in their homes, neighborhoods, churches, and/or workplaces rather than expects the parents to come to the school.***

Parents can give an unending array of reasons why they can't get to the school for a parent-teacher meeting. Some of the reasons are legitimate. Discussing and cussing parents for not attending is of little value;

therefore, the program must be taken to the parents in small groups of 8 to 12 parents on their home turf at work, at worship, or at their home.

6. ***The focus is on what families can do at home, not advocacy and volunteer-type activities.***

The **number one** priority of parents is not the "cause" or the school but **their child**. Help parents to do what every parent can do, work with their own child in their home environment. Do a good job there first. Whatever extra energy is left over can be given to the school or to a "cause."

7. ***There are no fees and refreshments and child care are provided.***

The parents who can afford to pay a fee usually don't need the information. The parents who need it can't pay anything; therefore, to encourage attendance, remove the excuse of money and inconvenience in order to help the children.

8. ***Each parenting session is complete within itself, in case certain parents can't attend all sessions.***

Many parents cannot commit to a series of 7 or 8 sessions; therefore, make every session a complete package so that a parent who cannot return can still use what he/she has learned from whatever sessions have been attended.

9. ***Family cultures/values/mores are respected in the program.***

America is moving from a melting-pot concept to cultural pluralism, wherein each culture is respected and protected. Whatever is taught in the sessions must respect the family values of those attending.

10. ***A mixture of parents, teachers/counselors, and principals serve as facilitators.***

When persons of all positions in the school serve as facilitators, it brings them together as equals in a common effort...it enhances the *esprit de corp* in the entire program.

11. ***The program is relevant, relaxed, and rewarding.***

Parents who benefit will return for a second and third session. Parents do attend meetings that provide them with meaningful tools to meet their needs.